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ABSTRACT

The adult leaders of the Little League baseball organization announced that their "world series" would be limited to American teams. This raises a question about the capacity of Americans to adjust to a world in which power is diffused and centers of decision are plural. First one must consider whether the leaders of public higher education still have jurisdiction over what is taught and learned in college, or whether future decisions about education are going to come from the outside communities that both criticize and support higher education. Who gets in and what they need to succeed when they emerge has passed largely out of the jurisdiction of higher education's leaders. The author suggests that the policy of meeting each new demand by increasing present course structures has gone far enough. It may be time for a new kind of coure curriculum, including training in integrative brainwork, a capacity for self-analysis, education about social goals, public purposes, and ethics, some practice in real-world negotiation, and some knowledge required to take up citizenship in the world. Americans must be able to cope with the world interdependence. The capacity of Americans to cope with interdependence will depend most on two factors--the nature of their education and the quality of their leadership. (Author/PG)

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THE LITTLE LEAGUE AND THE IMPERATIVES OF INTERDEPENDENCE

An address by

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THE LITTLE LEAGUE AND THE IMPERATIVES OF INTERDEPENDENCE

Harlan Cleveland

Just a week ago, the adult leaders of the Little League baseball organization announced that henceforth their "world series" would be limited to American teams. They did not say why. But the news item reported, deadpan, that teams from Taiwan and Japan have captured seven of the last eight world championships.

The little incident raises a big question about the capacity of Americans to adjust to a world in which power is diffused and centers of decision are plural. I want to ask whether our public colleges and universities are giving that question the priority it now deserves.

But first -- as they say on television -- we have to consider whether the professional leadership of public higher education still has jurisdiction over what is taught and learned in college, or whether future decisions about education for interdependence are going to come from the outside communities which both criticize and support what you insiders are going -- in which case I am talking about the right subject to the wrong crowd.

I.

Last August, during my final month as administrator of a land-grant institution, I participated in Hong Kong in a lively discussion among Asian and American university presidents. The Asians were quick to agree that their main problem was how to get from their governments the money to buy talent and build buildings, without getting the political authorities into educational policy as well. It all sounded rather familiar.

At one point an Oxford-educated Asian was arguing, in effect, that the academic community must relax and enjoy its role as an object of politics and a subject of government.

"The marriage with Caesar must be consummated -- there's no alternative", he declared. "Agreed", said another Asian university administrator. "But the question is, 'How many times a week?'"

Public higher education can indeed be seen, in one dimension, as a continuing struggle between the academy's insiders (faculty, administrators, trustees) and relevant outsiders (parents, patrons, politics and the practical world of "downtown"). I think it's fair to say that the insiders have lost two preliminary skirmishes, and that the main event is just ahead of us.

The first skirmish was about who gets into college. The insiders, in the tradition of the learning professions, wanted to be selective. But the surrounding and supporting community came to want students admitted to post-secondary education without discrimination as to race, creed, sex, or previous exposure to the basic skills of computation and communication. "Open admissions" is a bold and courageous public policy, for which the initiative has come almost wholly from the outsiders. The quantitative results are impressive: last semester, one out of every sixteen persons in the State of Hawaii was a student at the University of Hawaii.

At the other end of the system, the outsiders' expectations have shifted from equality to quality. They want the insiders to take an undifferentiated mass of students and arrange them according to intellectual achievement, ready for stacking in the hierarchical job market that awaits them off campus. What James Perkins calls entry by egalitarian principles and exit by meritocratic standards is the new social contract in American higher education. Colleges and universities, and especially, the public colleges and universities, are the egalitarian way to make an aristocracy

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of achievement acceptable in a democratic society. It is now part of our democratic ethos that if you apply the merit principle to a large enough body of students, the resulting discrimination is acceptable. This double ethic suits the students fine: they want an equal chance to go to college, but they also want a job when they get out.

II.

Who gets in, and what they need to succeed when they emerge, has thus passed largely out of the jurisdiction of higher education's insiders. But you do still retain most of the control over what happens between registration and graduation. Whether you, the academic leaders in the learning professions, can hang onto that control depends on how you resolve the dilemma that results from mixing egalitarian entry with meritocratic exit.

It would be nice if the dilemma were simple: the outsiders want the students trained for that first job out of college, and the academics inside the system want the students educated for fifty years of self-fulfillment. The trouble is, the objects of all this kind attention want both. The ancient collision between each student's short-term and long-term goals, between "training" and "education", between "vocational" and "general", between honing the mind and nourishing the soul, divide the professional educators, divide the outside critics and supporters, and divide the students too.

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Just now our favorite way to resolve the dilemma is to delegate it to the individual student. We "maximize the student's options" by creating a bewildering proliferation of courses and programs of study, a cafeteria of the intellect using what the food service people call the "scramble system".

For the limited minority of our students who know just what they want and why, the new freedom doesn't work badly --though their self-serving desires may be dangerously narrow, and exclude the skills and curiosities that fit them for responsible citizenship in an interdependent world. But most students expect some guidance in creating an intellectually nutritious trayful of reading, discussion and work experience.

My guess is that if U.S. colleges and universities continue to proliferate courses, external pressure groups and the state and federal governments will sooner or later impose social and economic and even political criteria for curriculum-building in higher education. At the graduate level this already happens to some extent, as government bribes the universities with research funds to teach what political leaders think is important and are certain is safe. At the undergraduate level, if our ultimate curricular principle is a cop-out called "maximum options", the outsiders will, in the end, tell the academic what to teach and the students what they can learn at the public's expense.

III.

I am suggesting, in short, that the policy of meeting each new demand by proliferating our course structure has gone far enough. Perhaps, in the alternating current of general and job-oriented education which has been the history of American higher education, it is time for a new kind of "core curriculum" -- something very different from Columbia's World Civilization, Syracuse's Responsible Citizenship or Chicago's Great Books, yet still a central idea about what every educated person should know, or have, or try to be.

Such a core is obviously not going to have very much to do with facts that can be learned. If it is true that each 40 minutes produces enough new knowledge to fill a 24-volume encyclopedia, if our world of indiscriminate enlightenment really turns out 450,000 books and 60 million pieces of literature in a year's time, most of the facts we learn in school are certainly not going to be true for as long as we can remember them. The last time I took a course in physics, my teacher told me the atom couldn't be spilt. When I studied Keynesian economics with a young Oxford tutor named Harold Wilson, I learned that inflation and recession came in cycles, but never at the same time. This remembered learning has not been very useful to me, of late; and it doesn't seem to be working very well for Prime Minister Wilson, either.

Last summer at the Aspen Institute, an international group of educators chaired by Jim Perkins brooded about the content of a new core. There was no consensus -- it wasn't that kind of a meeting. But it helped me conclude that if we think hard about the trends in post-industrial society, and consult the instincts and perceptions of our own future-oriented students, we could construct a new "core curriculum" from such elements as these:

1) Training in integrative brainwork -- the capacity to synthesize, for the solution of real world problems, the analytical methods and insights of the vertical academic disciplines. (Exposure to basic science and mathematics, to elementary systems analysis, and to what a computer can and cannot do, are part, but only part of this training.)

2) A capacity for self-analysis -- through the study of ethnic heritage, religion and philosophy, art and literature, the achievement of some fluency in answering the question, "Who am I?"

3) Education about social goals, public purposes and the ethics of citizenship -- to enable each "educated person" to answer for himself, including herself, the question, "How do I avoid getting efficiently to where I will not want to be when I get there?"

4) Some practice in real-world negotiation, in the psychology of consultation, which is the essence of leadership in a horizontal society.

5) The analytical capacity, the rudimentary knowledge, and the attitude of personal responsibility requried to take up citizenship in an interdependent world.

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IV.

"Interdependence" is a suddenly fashionable buzzword in our public rhetoric. It appears in every speech by the Secretary of State; it is the topic of many a conference and research paper; it has been the theme of international sensitivity training sessions in Stockholm two years ago, in Bucharest last summer, and (during the past two weeks) in Rome. The danger of this instant popularity is that interdependence will become a Humpty-Dumpty word, meaning whatever the speaker wants it to mean.

Yet the word is a clue to a very large part of the reality our students face, not upon graduation or twenty years later but right now -- a large factor in the life-styles open to them, the kinds of work in which they can find fulfillment, the ethical standards they develop to guide their personal behavior. The fact is that the humanistic management of international interdependence is the critical scientific, technological, economic, political and moral problem of our time.

Each of us has to face it now: present trends in population growth, urban in-migration, inflation, unemployment, food production, energy supply and demand, pollution of the air and of inland and oceanic waters, military technology, restrictive ideologies and inward-looking nationalisms, all taken together, are clearly adverse to the self-fulfillment of nearly all human beings, and to the survival of a very large minority of the human race. These problems are so interrelated that action on any of

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them requires thinking about the whole predicament -- about what the Club of Rome has been calling the world problematique.

Even if commenced now or soon, the reversal or control of these trends will require enormous changes in attitudes and styles of living, and will also require a generation of time -- say, the rest of the 20th century.

Meanwhile, shortages and the desperation and rivalries they intensify will provoke acute conflicts. The arms available for use in these conflicts, which are not only conventional and exotic military weapons but also economic and monetary and psychological and biological and meteorological weapons, will no longer be available to an oligopoly of a few so-called "powers".

Somewhere near the center of these multiple conflicts will be, as always, the ancient confrontation between rich and poor. Somewhere near the center of a strategy for survival and beyond will be a transplanetary bargain that promises to define and provide minimum human needs, and promises to keep advanced societies from advancing past prudent limits in using scarce resources.

V.

Americans -- their government but also their corporations, their voluntary agencies, and their colleges and universities -- will be deeply involved in the planet-sized bargaining that is evidently just ahead of us. No one who sat in line at a filling station last fall can doubt the intimate interconnection between faraway causes and highly personal effects.

What is in doubt is the capacity of Americans to cope with interdependence. You know it's in doubt because our political leaders still calculate that we are not prepared to do what they say in speeches is needed to be done. They don't think we are willing to conserve fuel, limit our appetites, revise our economic expectations, or care about dying people we could save.

Are they right? I don't know for sure, but I am sure and certain that the capacity of Americans to cope with interdependence will depend mostly on two factors -- the nature of their education and the quality of their leadership. As tax-exempt institutions we cannot do very much directly to tell our political leaders that Americans are readier for boldness and change than they think. But we can do something about the education of some ten million Americans now participating in postsecondary education, whose posture as citizens of the world may resolve, or make insoluble, the macroproblems of our time.

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In a world where nobody is in charge, all of us find ourselves partly in charge. All of us, therefore, need the personal sense of direction, the world outlook, the feeling of individual responsibility for the collective outcome, which only a few elite leaders, educated in the best universities, used to need. Is it unrealistic to suppose that millions of Americans can change their minds about growth, about diet, about family size, about the politics of interdependent survival?

Of course it isn't. Consider the rapidity with which we are all becoming aware of new limits -- an "upper limit" to warfare which the weapons of frightfulness have brought about, an "outer limit" to the physical capacity of the biosphere to sustain human life, and a potential "time limit" on the very existence of the human race: we are the first generation which knows that it is literally possible for our grandchildren or our great-grandchildren not to be there at all.

Yes, we can change our collective minds in a hurry when we know we need to. Who would have thought, in the 1950's, that attitudes toward population growth would bring the United States below zero growth rates by the mid-Seventies? Who would have predicted the charisma of the environmental movement? Who would have thought that a war could be stopped, not by winning or losing it, but by a decision, starting at the grassroots, that it just didn't make sense?

Yet these rapid changes in personal philosophy and social action, under pressure from the young, have come about without much help from our systems of higher education, which are only now belatedly discovering the relevance to general education of family planning, the analysis of conflict, and the assessment of environmental impacts. How much better could we do if colleges and universities were leading, rather than following, their students in coming to grips with the imperatives of interdependence?

Gloomy prophecy is in long supply just now, and the prophecies will come true if our Little Leaguers, aged 8 to 12, don't learn by the time they get through college that the world series of survival isn't going to be played out among Americans. The colleges and universities of America have no more important task than to make sure those youngsters get the opportunity to learn what their adult leaders somehow missed when they went to school.

HC/jk
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